

CHAPTER 4: PARKS & RECREATION

Introduction

Public parks, trails and recreation offer countless values to Flathead County residents and visitors. Public parks, trails and open space provide the opportunity to be physically active and fit. Having close to home access to quality places to recreate is one of the most important factors in determining whether people are active and will stay that way.

Goal

- G.18 To accelerate the development process for park, trail, and open space infrastructure to meet the challenges of community growth and development.

Policies

- P.18.1 Acquisition of park and leisure facility sites should occur now to serve the future needs of the county, particularly water-based parks which provide public access to lakes, rivers and streams.
- P.18.2 With the exception of water based parks, subdivision park requirements should be used to create and/or fund dedicated park sites of optimal size of no less than five acres to accommodate operation and maintenance costs.
- P.18.3 Existing parks and recreational facilities should be operated and maintained in a quality condition for use by the general public.
- P.18.4 Develop strategies to fund, operate, and maintain new parks and recreational facilities.
- P.18.5 Prepare a comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan to guide the expansion of the park system to meet the needs and expectations of the growing public. Utilize the work completed by the LRPTF of identifying bike path routes and the work of the three cities and rails to trails.
- P.18.6 Flathead County should preserve and increase recreational access to public lands and waterways by procuring necessary land, easements, or rights of way.
- P.18.7 Create a Flathead County Bicycle Transportation Advisory Committee to determine and prioritize areas for bike path easement acquisition and construction, prioritize use of funds, guide grant applications, identify roads that should have bicycle lanes, determine maintenance funding mechanisms, and set county-wide bicycle path/lane construction standards.

Goal

- G.19 To create partnerships with common interest groups and the people within our community.

Policies

- P.19.1 Encourage parks, planning, maintenance and development coordination with other local jurisdictions, state, and federal agencies.
- P.19.2 Participate with developing partnerships, community civic groups and organizations, private sector building and development industry, and others interested in parks and recreation activities.
- P.19.3 Support “pocket parks” which are owned and maintained by Home Owner groups and Associations.
- P.19.4 Riparian buffers should be recognized for their recreational value and their ability to protect the quality of water along major streams and rivers in the County to enhance recreational opportunities, protect the quality of water (reduce erosion; surface runoff containing pesticides, fertilizers, etc.; stream bank depredation/defoliation; etc.) and their ability to protect the natural aesthetics of waterways.
- P.19.5 Whenever possible, County parks should be developed in conjunction with public or private schools.
- P.19.6 Develop standards, procedures, and requirements for the preparation, review, and adoption of neighborhood and subdivision park plans.

Goal

- G.20 Maintain and/or increase the current level of service for park facilities and recreation services in Flathead County relative to population growth and public demands and expectations.

Policies

- P.20.1 Provide new lands and indoor/outdoor recreation and park facilities outlined in the comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan to keep pace with expanding population and demand.

- P.20.2 Maintain level of recreation services by providing innovative programs geared towards a diverse demographic of county residents (children, adults, seniors, etc.).

PART 1: Community Benefits of Parks and Recreation (see Goals 18 and 19)

The economic benefits of parks and recreation areas are numerous. One of the more significant benefits is the increase in value of private lands adjacent to or near protected public parks, trails or open space. Close proximity of parks to residential areas leads to increased land values and safer walks for children and adults to the park and back. Often, quality parks and recreation areas are an important consideration of businesses looking at expansion or relocation. Parks and recreation areas improve the quality of the living environment and make communities livable and desirable for businesses and homeowners.

Parks, trails and open spaces provide vital green space in the fast changing landscape. They provide vegetative and recreational areas and can be used to reduce the impacts of development. These areas are also instrumental in providing access to rivers, lakes and adjoining public lands. Just as importantly parks, trails and open space maintain open view sheds, and provide groundwater recharge areas, floodplain protection, natural sound barriers, weed buffers, and filter pollutants from the air. Parks help to keep the living environment healthy.

Parks, trails and open spaces facilitate social interactions for individuals, families, civic groups and others. These areas are critical to maintaining community cohesion and pride. Parks provide meeting places where the community can develop social ties and bonds. Leisure activity in parks can reduce stress and enhance a sense of wellness. People go to parks, use trails or experience open space to reinvigorate themselves and to decrease anxieties of daily life.

Community recreation services and programs encourage organized structure and enjoyable activities for people of all ages. The Department of Parks and Recreation offers organized recreation programs for youth and adults. Programs currently offered for youth include outdoor flag football, volleyball and t-ball at various locations throughout the county. Adult programs include basketball, flag football and softball. The Conrad Sports Complex currently services over 100 softball teams. There are also a large number of nonprofit sports organizations throughout the county that offer a wide variety of activities for children and adults.

PART 2: Flathead County Parks

Existing Characteristics

The growing popularity and demand for parks and recreational opportunities are in proportion to the dynamic growth and development of Flathead County. During the growth policy public meetings held throughout Flathead County in November and

December of 2005 and January of 2006, numerous residents cited increased and improved parks and recreation services as desirable goals for the future of the county. (See Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary.) A growing public desires greater opportunities for passive and organized recreation programming. Greater access to water-based recreation is also a growing priority. The Department of Parks and Recreation is currently responsible for the development, operation and maintenance of a wide range and variety of parks and recreation facilities. Although the existing park and recreation system offers recreational opportunities for individuals, families and group users, it should be dynamic to meet changing public needs and desires.

The department currently maintains 37 park and recreation facilities and one cemetery totaling approximately 383 acres. The facilities can be categorized by function. Of the 37 park sites, 20 are land based parks, 14 sites are water based parks, and four are special use parks. Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 list the parks in each category.

Land based parks account for 97 acres (see Table 4.1). Land based parks range from 1/3 of an acre to 24 acres with an average area of just under five acres. Within these parks there are 20 ball fields, one volleyball court, four basketball courts, multi purpose fields, and most offer picnic area and child playgrounds.

Table 4.1
Existing Land-Based Parks and Recreation Facilities

Park	Acres	Facilities
Aero Lane Park	1.0	Ball field
Ben Williams Park	5.0	Volleyball/picnic/playground
Carlyle Johnson Park	14.0	Ball fields/soccer/playground/picnic
Conrad Sports Complex	15.0	Ball fields/basketball/playground/picnic
Country Estates Park	3.7	Grass field
Evergreen Lions Park	3.4	Ball field/basketball/picnic/playground
Green Acres Park	1.5	Picnic/playground
Happy Valley Park	24.0	Playground
Hillcrest Park	7.0	Ball fields/multi-use fields/playground
Hilltop Terrace Park	1.9	Picnic/playground
Kokanee Bend Park	4.2	Ball field/picnic/playground/horseshoe
Lake Hills Park	4.1	Not developed
Martin City Park	1.6	Ball field/playground/picnic
Meadow Hills Park	2.9	Picnic/playground
Mission Village Overlook Park	1.6	Picnic/playground
North Haven Park	1.1	Picnic/playground
Potoczny-Bigfork Park	0.3	Grass field
Silver Shadow Park	1.0	Ball field/playground/picnic
Sliter Park	2.0	Picnic/playground/stage
Sunrise Terrace Park	2.2	Playground/picnic

Source: Flathead County Parks and Recreation

There are 14 water based parks covering 163 acres offering access to lakes and rivers via boat ramps, docks, and fishing. (See Table 4.2.) These water front public access areas are especially important due to the increasing private shoreline development and the increasing popularity of water based recreation. The average size of water based parks is about 12 acres, although most of the Leisure Island Park on Flathead River is undeveloped and in a natural state. Discounting the Leisure Island Park natural area the average size of a water based park is two acres. These water based facilities offer access to three rivers and six lakes. Map 4.1 shows the location of existing park and leisure facilities.

Table 4.2
Existing Water-Based Parks and Recreation Facilities

Park	Acres	Facilities
Bigfork Boat Dock Park	--	Benches/picnic (Swan River)
Blankenship/Max Edgar Park	8.3	Boat ramp (Echo Lake)
Blue Grouse Park	4.3	Boat ramp/dock/picnic (Little Bitterroot Lake)
Flathead River Ranchettes Park	2.7	Boat ramp/picnic (Flathead River)
Foys Lake Park	--	Boat ramp/dock/swim area/picnic (Foys Lake)
Kelsey/Cummings Dam Park	1.2	Boat ramp/picnic (Little Bitterroot Lake)
Kings Loop Park	2.0	Fishing Access (Whitefish River)
Lakeside – Adams Park	--	Boat ramp (Flathead Lake)
Lakeside – Bierney Creek Park	--	Boat ramp (Flathead Lake)
Lazy Bay Park	3.2	Dock (Whitefish Lake)
Leisure Island Park	137.2	Boat ramp/picnic (Flathead River)
Little Bitterroot Lake Park	1.2	Lake access (Little Bitterroot Lake)
Somers Swimming Park	2.0	Swim area/picnic (Flathead Lake)
Whitefish Boat Park	0.5	Boat dock/picnic (Whitefish Lake)

Source: Flathead County Parks and Recreation

Four special use facilities account for 123 acres (see Table 4.3). Special use facilities are dedicated for specific or single purpose recreational activities and serve a limited population, such as the Herron Equestrian Park. Herron Equestrian Park also offers camping, biking cross country skiing, rugby and other multi purpose organized activities. The Demersville Cemetery receives maintenance only.

Table 4.3
Existing Special Use Parks

Park	Acres	Facilities
Demersville Cemetery	--	Cemetery/Historic Site
Foys Community Center	2.0	Community center building
Herron Equestrian Park	118.0	Horse stalls/dressage/picnic/x-country skiing
Hungry Horse Island Park	3.3	Monuments

Source: Flathead County Parks and Recreation

Administration of Parks and Recreation

Parks and recreation services in Flathead County are overseen by the Flathead County Parks Board. The board was reestablished in 1997 and is comprised of five members. These members are appointed by the Flathead County Board of Commissioners to serve three year terms. The Board has responsibility for the administration of the Department of Parks and Recreation and the authority to employ the department director. The board also employs staff to program recreation as well as operate and maintain facilities. The Parks Board can acquire land needed for parks and recreation facilities. These sites may be in incorporated cities as well as in unincorporated areas of Flathead County.

PART 3: State and Federal Recreation Areas (see Goal 1 in Chapter 2: Land Uses)

Within Flathead County there are numerous parks and recreation areas under federal and state management. These facilities offer a wide diversity of and outstanding all season outdoor recreational amenities for county residents. Major recreational facilities and administering agencies are listed in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4
Federal & State Recreation Areas

Facility	Area	Management Agency
Glacier Nat'l Park	635,214	US National Park Service
Flathead National Forest	1,875,545	US Forest Service
Kootenai, Lewis and Clark and Lolo National Forests	115,390 (total acreage)	US Forest Service
Lost Trails National Wildlife Refuge	7,885	US Fish & Wildlife
Swan River National Wildlife Refuge	1,568	US Fish & Wildlife
Smith Lake Waterfowl Production Area	5,189	US Fish & Wildlife
Wayfarers State Park	67	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Whitefish Lake State Park	11	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Whitefish State Trust Lands	13,000	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Flathead River FAS	44 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Pressentine FAS	11 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Horseshoe Lake FAS	23 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Kokanee Bend FAS	185 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Lone Pine State Park	229 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Old Steel Bridge FAS	128 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Sportsman's Bridge FAS	6 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks

Source: Montana Natural Resource Information System

The primary distinction between federal and state recreation areas and county recreation areas is programming. Parks under county administration offer active organized sport activities (e.g. softball, volleyball, soccer and football, etc.), while federal and state lands promote unique outdoor activities such as camping, hiking, fishing and hunting. The importance of federal and state lands for recreation is tied to the custom and culture of Montana residents and visitors for outdoor activities. Flathead County seeks to provide recreational opportunities that are an alternative to activities found on federal and state lands as well as safeguard public access to public lands and water bodies.

PART 4: Level of Service (see Goal 20)

Level of service is one tool used to baseline existing parks and recreational infrastructure relative to population. Flathead County's population in 2004 was estimated slightly less than 82,000. The population of the unincorporated area of the county was estimated at 53,505. Based on the unincorporated population, the county offers approximately 7.2 acres of total recreational area per 1,000 residents. Park space per 1,000 population is shown on Table 4.5 for each type of park.

Table 4.5
Park Space Level of Service

Park	Number	Acres	Average Size	AC/1,000 population
Land-Based	20	97	5	1.8
Water-Based	14	163 ¹	12 ²	3.0
Special Use	3	123	41	2.3
Overall	37	383	10	7.2

Source: Flathead County Parks and Recreation

Level of service calculations are used to monitor performance in implementing park and recreation service delivery and infrastructure goals. Level of service goals are normally associated with comprehensive parks master plans. Flathead County does not currently have a comprehensive parks and recreation master plan and, therefore, cannot anticipate future public needs.

Resident comments in 2006 indicate a need to provide organized sports and other recreational activities and services. Softball and youth soccer are popular and highly visible activities, with more than 100 teams competing for space at the Conrad Sports Complex. Organized recreation for youth is in demand. More specialized types of recreation, such as skateboard parks and swimming, are growing in popularity. The County provides organized recreational programs to more than 10,000 residents each year. Presently the county does not have a recreation center for basketball or other indoor recreation activities.

Using the level of service tool to identify future park space needs can predict gaps in service delivery. Using countywide trends, which include incorporated city populations, the overall population is expected to continue to grow by about 20% per decade over the next 20 years to reach a resident population of approximately 112,000. The ratio of overall county to unincorporated populations would result in approximately 74,190 within the unincorporated area by 2025.

¹ Approximately 137 acres of this total comes from one park (Leisure Island Park) that is primarily undeveloped.

² This average is heavily skewed by the large size of Leisure Island Park (137 acres).

It can be expected that organized recreation programming will increase in relation to population growth. The current 10,000 residents served through recreational programming in 2005 will increase to about 14,000 by 2025. Park space requirements will need to be analyzed based on long term goals for park system expansion and service delivery. Decisions will need to be made on priorities for passive versus active and organized programming.

If no additions to the park system are realized over the next 20 years, the park space will fall from a current level of 7.2 acres per 1,000 population to 5.2 acres per 1,000 residents. The relative decreases in level of service and new park spaces needed to maintain the current level of service are shown in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6
Park Space Projections

Park Type	Acres	Current Acreage per 1,000 Pop.	Acreage per 1,000 Pop. w/o new facilities 2025	Additional acres needed to maintain current acreage per 1,000 population
Land-based	97	1.9	1.3	38
Water-based	163	3.0	2.2	57
Special Use	123	2.3	1.7	48
Overall	383	7.2	5.2	143

To maintain the current level of service, an additional 143 acres of new parks would need to be added to the park system. This would include an additional 38 acres for land based parks, 57 acres of water based parks, and 48 acres of new special use facilities. It is essential that the park and recreation system and programs are viewed in a comprehensive fashion, that all component are considered in development and on going management. If Flathead County anticipates providing meaningful park and recreation services to a growing public, it is essential to develop appropriate sites, manage developed parks in a quality condition, and facilitate recreational programming.

A comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan is called for by policy P.17.5. To be viable, that plan must consider a number of factors. Flathead County's growing population is changing the county's demographics. The total population grew 36% in the last fifteen years, while the student population only grew 7%. That has an obvious impact on the type of recreation facilities that might be needed. For a level of service discussion to be meaningful the plan must address the adequacy of the current level of service. How much overcrowding has resulted from recent population increases and in what type of facilities? The county's ability to fund the maintenance of current facilities and services must be addressed as well as determining the best methods of funding the creation and maintenance of additional facilities. A strategic plan that is based on solid research will allow the county to confidently face its future needs for parks and recreation.